

Automatic Eligibility for Free Meal Benefits Extended to All Children Enrolled in Head Start

PURPOSE: To provide guidance regarding amendments to the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA) that extends automatic eligibility for free meal benefits, including free milk, to all children enrolled in Head Start and participating in Child Nutrition Programs.

SCOPE: Organizations participating in the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.

DESCRIPTION:

On December 12, 2007, the President signed The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (Public Law 110-134) which contains several significant revisions to the Head Start program, including amendments to the eligibility criteria in section 645 of the Head Start Act (42 U.S.C. 9840). Public Law 110-134 also amends sections 9(b)(12)(A)(iii) and 17(c)(5) of the NSLA to correspond with the new eligibility criteria.

Head Start serves primarily children from families with household incomes at or below the Federal poverty level. However a small proportion of children in families with household incomes above the poverty level may be served. In the past, only those children who were income eligible for Head Start were considered automatically eligible for free meals in the child nutrition programs.

Public Law 110-134 makes any child enrolled in Head Start automatically eligible for free meals without further application or eligibility determination. Therefore, even a child who is not from a household with an income at or below the poverty level is automatically eligible for free meals if they are enrolled in Head Start.

Institutions and school food authorities (SFA) may now establish eligibility of all Head Start enrollees through documentation provided by the Head Start Program. Eligibility guidance from USDA to reflect this change will be updated.

All reimbursable meals served to children enrolled in Head Start may be claimed at the free rate. Institutions and SFAs may submit revised claims to claim all reimbursable meals served to Head Start enrollees that were not previously claimed at the free rate. All such reimbursable meals served on December 12, 2007, and beyond may be claimed. In summary, Head Start organizations are no longer required to collect Applications for Free and Reduced-Price Meals from enrolled participants.

SOURCE: USDA SP Policy Memorandum #23-2008, dated May 16, 2008